

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
March 20, 2002, 8:00 p.m. on PBS
The New York City Opera:
The Gershwins®' *Porgy and Bess*

The next *Live From Lincoln Center* telecast, on Wednesday evening March 20, will find us in the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center for the performance by the New York City Opera of The Gershwins® beloved opera *PORGY AND BESS*. As the years go by, this masterpiece of the American musical theater gains in stature and popularity, and it has become a staple in opera houses throughout the world. Our production is the one created to great acclaim by Sherwin M. Goldman in 1983 for Radio City Music Hall, based on his co-production with Houston Grand Opera which won Broadway's Tony Award in 1976 for Best Musical Revival. John DeMain, conductor of the original Houston performances, will be in the pit, and the Production Director is Tazewell Thompson.

The creation of *PORGY AND BESS* was not without its difficulties. In late 1926 George and Ira Gershwin were working on a new musical tailored for the specific talents of the remarkable British singer and actress, Gertrude Lawrence. After several working titles were abandoned, the show finally emerged as *Oh, Kay*. It became a solid hit. During the rehearsals for *Oh, Kay* Gershwin read a novel by the Southern poet, DuBose Heyward, titled *Porgy*. He sensed immediately that here was material for an opera, but Heyward informed him that the rights were unavailable, having been assigned to the Theater Guild for a proposed stage adaptation. It was Heyward's wife, Dorothy, who had secretly made the adaptation for the stage. The resulting play had a respectable run on Broadway in 1927.

Fast forward to 1932. In a letter in March to DuBose Heyward, Gershwin returned again to the idea of their collaborating on an opera based on *Porgy*. Heyward replied enthusiastically that since the Broadway play was no longer on the boards, the rights were now free and clear. Gershwin, however, replied that other commitments would make it impossible for him to settle down with *Porgy* for another two years. An interesting side-bar: in the intervening time Heyward was approached by none other than Al Jolson who wanted a musical version of the story in which he, Jolson, would play Porgy in blackface, with a libretto by Oscar Hammerstein II and music by Jerome Kern-the same creative team that a few years earlier had produced the immortal *Show Boat*. As it turned out other projects kept Jolson-Kern-Hammerstein otherwise occupied and their *Porgy* never came to pass. Heyward then began to send Gershwin scene after scene of his proposed libretto, but Gershwin was too busy with other projects to settle down and compose music for *Porgy*.

Finally in early 1934, between work on his successful radio program called

Music by Gershwin, he was able to start on *Porgy*. Virtually all communication between Gershwin and Heyward was conducted by mail-and correspondence was voluminous. Another interesting side-bar: at one point the great American bass, Paul Robeson, was being considered to create the role of the operatic Porgy. (Cooler heads prevailed: it is impossible to imagine the giant frame of Robeson resting on his knees on a cart and playing the role eight times a week!)

Early on Heyward, the most accommodating of collaborators, suggested that George's brother, Ira, might be brought in to write some of the lyrics. And so it was that Ira became part of the team; his main contribution was material for Sportin' Life, the Harlem gambler who becomes such a colorful character in the story. To steep himself in the local atmosphere Gershwin set out for Charleston, South Carolina-where the story takes place-in June 1934.

From Charleston Gershwin then went by ferry to Folly Island where the Heywards had a summer home. In one year, between September, 1934 and September, 1935 Gershwin and his collaborators completed the work, which gained the new title *PORGY AND BESS*. Just three days before the scheduled start of rehearsals, Gershwin completed the orchestration.

In the accepted custom of the time, *PORGY AND BESS* played an out-of-town tryout run in Boston in September, 1935. Serge Koussevitzky, the esteemed conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra with whom Gershwin had played the premiere of his Second Rhapsody a few years earlier, hailed it as "a great advance in American opera." The Boston theater critics were also enthusiastic, though there was some questioning of the work's three-hour length. By the time the show opened in New York it had been cut in length and texture.

Audience reaction was generally enthusiastic, but most of the critics were lukewarm at best. Only Leonard Lieblich of the New York American got it right: he called *PORGY AND BESS* 'the first authentic American opera.' The advance sale at the box office had been substantial, but the uncomprehending reviews led to a drop in ticket sales. By December a closing notice was posted and it was decided to take *PORGY AND BESS* on tour. For his part Gershwin considered the work a labor of love and remained convinced that it would stand the test of time.

How right he was, but it indeed took time. The first real breakthrough came in 1952 with a revival that had William Warfield and Leontyne Price in the title roles. That production was sent to Europe by the United States State Department and it played there to rapturous acclaim. In the fifty years since, *PORGY AND BESS* has enjoyed numerous successful productions, none more stimulating and satisfying than the Sherwin M. Goldman / Houston Grand Opera production in 1976, which was the first fully restored operatic version to be presented, and won both Broadway's Tony for Best Musical Revival and the Grammy for Best Recording of an opera. It is the 1983 Goldman production for Radio City Music Hall which is being presented by New York City Opera, to be seen on *Live From*

Lincoln Center on the evening of Wednesday, March 20. Marquita Lister sings the role of Bess and Alvy Powell is Porgy. Others in the cast will be Angela Renée Simpson as Serena, Timothy Robert Blevins as Crown, Dwayne Clark as Sportin' Life and Sabrina Elayne Carten as Maria.

As always, I leave you with the suggestion that you check with your local PBS station for the exact day and time of the telecast in your area. See you then!